Testimony in support of HB-5397 and SB-477

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Senator Abrams, Representative Steinberg, ranking members Hwang, Somers and Petit and distinguished members of the Public Health Committee: My name is John Harmon. I am from West Hartford and IndivisibleCT.

As I read through the bill to prepare for this testimony, two words stood out for me: data and research. These are things I care about and were a big part of my career as a professor at Central Connecticut State University.

Data and research are necessary for good policy that produces results. I think there is general agreement that gun violence is something that needs to be reduced in our society and if we are going to dedicate public money and time to that task, we need to be sure that they will be spent wisely and effectively.

The most expensive and time-consuming part of the research process is gathering and organizing the needed data to answer your questions. The data situation for gun violence is particularly scattered and poor. There are 13 national data systems managed by federal agencies and even the best of them, the National Violent Death Registry System, gets data from only 16 states and most large-scale epidemiological studies get information from only 100 Emergency Departments. Add to that picture that most data are aggregated at the state level, and it is not possible to measure effectiveness at the community level. This is not a problem where the federal government is going to step in any time soon and provide resources to support policy. This is going to have to happen at the state level with your actions.

To get around this data problem, researchers have sought other sources. The Gun Violence Database uses sophisticated Natural Language Processing tools on newspaper reports and crowdsourcing to document incidents of violence. It documents 70 incidents in Connecticut since the beginning of this year right up to a shooting in Torrington five days ago. These incidents resulted in 16 deaths and 63 injuries. I got that information from just 10 minutes with the database. This is a rich pile of well-organized data that researchers more creative than I could use to suggest policy and measure its effectiveness.[1]

Traditional crime research depends heavily on 911 calls and crime reports but there is research that shows these significantly under-represent gun violence. In a study based in Washington, D.C. and Oakland, CA, published in 2015, they found that gunfire incidents detected by the ShotSpotter system, which is widely used around the country, resulted in very low levels of 911 calls. They make a case for using this type of surveillance data to measure policy effectiveness [2]. A second study by the same researchers found that juvenile curfews increased gunfire detected by ShotSpotter while a traditional focus on crime rates and homicides suggested that the curfews were working. [3] when they clearly were not.

These three studies are the tip of a relatively small iceberg. Establishing an Office of Gun Violence Prevention will allow for more research on how to reduce the rate of community gun violence in Connecticut and I hope you will report this bill out of committee with a strong, positive vote. Thank you.

NOTES

1. The Gun Violence Database: A new task and data set for NLP Ellie Pavlick1 Heng Ji2 Xiaoman Pan2 Chris Callison-Burch1 1Computer and Information Science Department, University of Pennsylvania 2Computer Science Department, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute [https://aclanthology.org/D16-1106.pdf]

2. Carr, Jillian and Doleac, Jennifer L., The Geography, Incidence, and Underreporting of Gun Violence: New Evidence Using Shotspotter Data (April 26, 2016). Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=2770506 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2770506

3. Carr, J. B., and J. L. Doleac (2015): "Keep the Kids Inside? Juvenile Curfews and Urban Gun Violence," Working paper, available at: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2486903.